

The Tarnished Ivory Tower

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The Ivory Tower of Academia. If you've been involved with the educational system in any way, shape, or form, you've at least seen it off in the distance. Perhaps you've occupied it's courtyard, or maybe even resided inside it's walls.

The Ivory Tower - is tarnished.

Last time I looked, academia and education were about teaching and learning. There is plenty of good research literature to indicate that adults learn primarily by interaction, by doing, by being actively involved in their own learning process. In effect, it is much the same way that children learn most effectively. As Bob Pike would say, adults are just babies with big bodies.

There are plenty of educators out there that profess that we should have that level of interaction and foster that active discovery process that makes for effective learning. Unfortunately, these are also the same educators that then implement what may perhaps be one of the most stagnant learning strategies available - the lecture - combined with the high-tech equivalent, the PowerPoint presentation. The premise behind multimedia made it an appealing option for presentations. Along the way it became the de-facto standard for lack of involvement from the educator's side of the "learning" equation. In it's most typical use, it amounts once again to "talking at" people as opposed to "fostering their learning" - and these are two totally different statements. And, once again, it involves being the "sage on the stage" as opposed to mentoring a learner interactively.

In the midst of this "adult education", the educators foster "self responsibility", right? Sure - by taking attendance, testing for the sake of testing, and creating assignments as a means of "assessment of learning" as opposed to "assessment for learning". Frankly, there is no better way to become responsible for your own learning than to define your own goals (given the context in which they take place), and then being left to decide what it is you want to partake in, how often, and to what level.

Ultimately, most courses will have an assessment algorithm built in - and in my eyes, the student either accepts responsibility for their own learning (be that in class or otherwise) or they don't. Simple. A failed exam may be the ultimate learning tool. As a teacher, I'm there to mentor, not to hold your hand. If you've accepted responsibility as a professional (or professional to be, or at any other level), then you accept the task at hand - to become qualified in your field of study. You don't want to show up for class? No worries - we'll find out your level of comprehension of the material come exam time. But the instructor is just going to read the material from the PowerPoint slides? Ahhh yes, it is incumbent upon the instructor to give the "consumer" a value-added benefit for attending - not just a grade for walking in the door. Students - aren't they all consumers, with instructors being simply a conduit for the product?

That's not saying that I've not stood in front of a class - and lectured at them. It's not to say that I haven't used a few slides in my day. It's just a reminder that it's not about "me" on the stage. It's not about showing you that I know a lot, or that I can use a lot of medical-ese with verve and flair. It's not about how hard I grade my exams, or how hard it is to pass my class. It's about the environment for learning that is created. And that, fellow educators, IS all about the student. As I say now that I step off my ivory soapbox - lest we forget - if it wasn't for students, teachers wouldn't exist.

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